

Discover how sustainable development, children's rights and tobacco control are linked

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When the members of the United Nations adopted the Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development, they promised, among other things, to fight poverty and hunger worldwide, protect the climate and improve the health of all. They set up 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), among them SDG 3: 'Health for All at All Ages'. The most important instrument to achieve this is SDG 3.a: 'Strengthen the implementation of the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC)'. The FCTC is an international health treaty with 180 Parties, is based on human rights and explicitly refers to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN CRC).

Unfairtobacco emphasizes the links between SDGs, children's rights and tobacco control in a new brochure and offers recommendations aiming for a tobacco-free world.

How tobacco impedes sustainable development

More than 17 million people work in tobacco cultivation worldwide, mainly in low- and middle-income countries with low labour standards, where more than 90% of the global tobacco harvest is produced. Smallholder farmers find it difficult to earn a living from tobacco cultivation (irreconcilable with SDGs 1 and 2)¹ and need the help of their children as contribution to their livelihood, even at the expense of their education (irreconcilable with SDGs 8.7 and 4). Dangerous chemicals are intensively used in the fields, and due to the lack of protective clothing occupational accidents such as poisonings are widespread (irreconcilable with SDGs 3.9 and 8). In addition, nicotine is absorbed through the skin when workers get into contact with tobacco leaves, eventually causing acute nicotine poisoning, the so-called 'green tobacco sickness' (irreconcilable with SDG 8.8). Thus, the widespread use of child labour is particularly worrying². On top of it, tobacco cultivation damages the environment: tobacco depletes the soil of nutrients and, consequently, forests are cleared to develop new fertile fields as well as to obtain firewood for curing the green tobacco leaves. The curing process requires globally around 8 million tonnes of fuelwood every year (irreconcilable with SDGs 12.2, 13 and 15.2). Furthermore, the chemicals used in tobacco growing enter waterbodies and adversely affect aquatic life biodiversity (irreconcilable with SDGs 6.3 and 6.6)³.

Approximately one billion people worldwide consume tobacco. Eight million people die from it every year and about 1.2 million die from exposure to secondhand smoke⁴. Tobacco is the leading preventable cause of premature death from non-communicable diseases (irreconcilable with SDG 3.4). Smoking prevalence is highest worldwide in population groups with low socioeconomic status, in low- and middle-income countries as well as in high-income countries (irreconcilable with SDGs 1.2 and 10.2)⁵. After tobacco consumption, tobacco waste, especially cigarette butts, also damage the environment because the toxicants contained in the butts leach out into soil and water (irreconcilable with SDGs 6.3, 6.6, 11.6 and 14.1).

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How tobacco violates children's rights

Children and adolescents are particularly vulnerable to the effects of tobacco production and consumption. The widespread use of child labour in connection with the living and working conditions in tobacco cultivation specifically violates the children's rights to health (UN CRC Art. 24), to adequate standard of living (UN CRC Art. 27), to education (UN CRC Art. 28), to leisure (UN CRC Art. 31) and to protection from economic exploitation (UN CRC Art. 32). Both the marketing of addictive and harmful tobacco products, which is specifically targeted at children and adolescents, and the lack of protection from secondhand smoke violate children's rights to life (UN CRC Art. 6), to information (UN CRC Art. 17), to health (UN CRC Art. 24) and to protection from narcotic drugs (UN CRC Art. 33). In 2013, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child published its General Comment on the Right to Health and explicitly referred to the need to transpose the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control into domestic law⁶.

The entirety of children's rights leads to the conclusion: children have a right to a tobacco-free world. That means a world where tobacco consumption has been reduced to a meaningless level in the majority of countries and where the tobacco industry is highly regulated. Children have the right to be protected from the tobacco industry, i.e. not to be exploited in tobacco cultivation, to live in a smoke-free environment that protects them from secondhand smoke as well as from starting to smoke themselves, and to have access to smoking cessation support if they have become addicted to tobacco⁷.

The state has an obligation to respect, protect and fulfil children's rights. The regulation of the tobacco industry is not a voluntary matter of companies, but a duty of the government. In all measures taken on the way to a tobacco-free world, the best interests of the child (UN CRC Art. 3) must be paramount and it must be ensured that children's views are considered (UN CRC Art. 12).

How a tobacco-free world can be created

Aiming for a tobacco-free world, one can find the framework and guidelines for action in the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, the Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which

are complementary and mutually reinforcing. The monitoring of implementation progress is embedded within the framework of these international instruments. The FCTC Secretariat of the WHO regularly evaluates the mandatory reports of the States Parties. In 2018, for example, measures to protect people from secondhand smoke in public places (FCTC Art. 8) have been implemented by 88% of the reporting states. A comprehensive ban on tobacco advertising (FCTC Art. 13) has only been implemented by 61% of the states, not including Germany, where *Unfairtobacco* is located. Support for alternative livelihoods for tobacco farmers (FCTC Art. 17) is the least implemented Article⁸.

The monitoring of the sustainability agenda is voluntary for the states. Since 2016, Germany has been reporting on progress with different priorities. The measures for implementing the FCTC (SDG 3.a) are assessed by the government as sufficient solely on the basis of smoking prevalence, disregarding for example social inequalities in smoking or protection from secondhand smoke. Efforts to shape sustainable supply chains of German companies (SDGs 8 and 12) are focused on individual sectors, e.g. textiles and cocoa, and continue to be based on voluntary action⁹.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child requires all States Parties to fulfil their reporting obligations. The German government sent its regular report to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in April 2019. In this report, the German government explains that smoking among youth aged 12–17 years has decreased since the turn of the millennium, but completely ignores the topics of exposure to secondhand smoke and cigarette advertising. At the same time, the responsibility of companies for their supply chains remains voluntary¹⁰. Alternative reports from civil society are expected in the first half of 2020. Together with members of the German Network on Children's Rights and Tobacco Control, *Unfairtobacco* will submit such a report.

What our brochure offers

Children's Rights and Tobacco Control assembles experts from different areas who deal with issues ranging from tobacco cultivation to tobacco use. They show the impact of smoking and secondhand smoke on children and discuss social inequalities in smoking among children as well as the legal situation when children are exposed to secondhand smoke at home.

They analyse how the tobacco industry uses influencer marketing in social media. They describe conditions and consequences of child labour in tobacco growing and examine the tobacco industry's responsibility for human rights violations. The concluding chapter offers detailed recommendations for governments, businesses, civil society, and individuals.

Furthermore, children themselves have their say. They share their views on working on tobacco plantations, being exposed to secondhand smoke at home or banning tobacco.

'I dig in the fields for many hours, the whole day, I never find time to rest. (...) If I explain [to her stepmother, editor's note] that I am tired, she does not listen. Instead, she gives me other work to do, I have to weed tobacco and water seedbeds for tobacco.'

16-year-old girl from Tanzania, working in her family's tobacco farm

'My mother and father always smoke. I always tell them to quit, but they don't listen.'

Boy, 5th grade, from Germany, exposed to secondhand smoke at home

'If I were a politician, I would also forbid the sale of cigarettes and the cultivation of cigarettes.'

Boy, 5th grade, from Germany, in a school workshop

The brochure can be ordered or downloaded at: <https://unfairtobacco.org/en/material/brochure-childrens-rights-and-tobacco-control/>

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The author has completed and submitted the ICMJE Form for Disclosure of Potential Conflicts of Interest and none was reported.

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